

Accountability, Elitism, Access, and Censorship:

A Dialogue Between Two Professional Arts Bureaucrats
as imagined by Andrew James Paterson

Arts bureaucrats A and B, from Andrew J. Paterson's 1994 videotape *Controlled Environments* (videographer: Michael Balsler). Courtesy V Tape.



Andrew James Paterson is a Toronto-based interdisciplinary artist who has worked in video, performance, media-arts curation, critical and fictional writing, and music. His work is characterized by an ambivalent fascination with bureaucracies, academics, and systems in general. He has always been obsessed with performer/audience inter-relationships and dynamics.

Paterson's contribution to this volume utilizes the self-dialogue format found in his 1994 videotape *Controlled Environments*, in which the artist first portrayed career cultural bureaucrats A and B. Recently, the artist presented a live performance work titled *Performance: A Performance* at A Space Gallery in Toronto, during which the inexplicably inconvenient technological failures somehow seemed to confirm the performer's pet theories regarding audiences and chaos theory. Currently, Paterson is working on a novel, tentatively titled *Systems and Corridors*, involving the suspicious death of a suspect academic.

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Hello, B. It's A.

If you have a hangover I can call you later.

Well, B, after attempting to sleep on our argument from last night, I'm still very upset about your tirade against all that can even be *perceived* as elitist.

I don't necessarily disagree with your sentiments, but I'm also detecting a certain quasi-populist hostility to art that requires not only visual, historical, and theoretical literacy, but that also demands some interpretive initiative on the part of gallery viewers.

You are correct, B. The word "elitist" is unavoidable when discussing art.

Artistic presentation requires either a single artist or a collective group of artists who have the conceit of labelling their work "art" in the first place. And they are assuming that gallery viewers will be impressed, challenged, or even repelled by their art objects and their presentations.

Perhaps, B. But even in more egalitarian modes of exhibition than those practised by traditional museum structures, there is still the conceit or audacity of presentation. As well as the

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(B's telephone rings.)

Why am I not surprised?

No, no. I was expecting to hear from you this morning, so we might as well resume our ongoing dialogue.

I'd prefer you didn't use the word "tirade," A. I merely indicated displeasure concerning artists who make no effort to let their work be visible, audible, and consequential to anyone besides themselves and their relatively tiny circle of peers.

Look, A, you know perfectly well that I myself prefer art that requires a bit of work, but your use of the word "populist" has a nasty insinuation of elitism.

Hmmmmmmmmmm.

How traditional.

assumption of interest.

Will you please let go of your confused amalgam of social-realism, anti-art-object pseudo-anarchism, and populist capitalism, and listen to me? Practically all of the rhetoric I'm hearing from the groups and individuals defending public arts funding emphasizes the belief that art is not remote and it is not elitist—that art, in fact, is accountable and, quite frankly, good for the economy.

This is ultimately a hopeless argument because it is based on the very problematic concept of "accountability." No matter how profitable the box-office receipts—and notice how the performing arts are being favoured here over the much less obviously "accountable" visual arts—no matter how many freelance artists may indeed provide each other and their friends with temporary employment, the people demanding accountability will never be satisfied because art is ultimately unaccountable.

Look, B. The demand for economic accountability of art is ultimately a red herring because both elected and self-appointed representatives of the hypothetical "public" do not really have an economic agenda. They are not impressed if some play or homegrown Canadian movie is a runaway box-office hit. Nor do they even notice when some Canadian art star becomes a major player on the international art market and, incidentally, no longer needs support from the public arts councils.

Yes, interest. That is a big assumption, isn't it, A? I don't know that there has to be an elitism or conceit in all forms of artistic presentation. I would like to think that there are alternatives.

Yes? And then what?

You are working with a very limited definition of the word "accountable."

Yes. Private market sales are the visual arts counterpart to box-office success. I agree with

The politicians'—and others'—obsession with economic accountability—their deficit fetish, if you will—is merely a smoke screen for their hysterical moralism.

I don't disagree with you, B. However, forcing funding bodies and exhibiting structures to be accountable to everybody ultimately plays right into the hands of not only megalomaniacal artists who consider themselves to be the only important or even valid artists on the fucking planet; it also plays into the hands of those who feel they have some right to control who receives funding and exhibiting privileges.

Not control, B. Censorship. Those who obsess about "accountability" are playing right into the hands of those who advocate censorship.

It's already been happening for years. Galleries—private, public, and artist-administered—are avoiding potentially controversial programming not only because of possible legal expenses but also because they are afraid of being perceived as arrogant or "unaccountable."

you there, A.

Okay, A. Now, before you accuse me of being an ally of obnoxious moralists and other advocates of censorship, I cannot accept your extremely literal and limited definition of "accountability." It's not only taxpayers or representatives of the hypothetical "public" who have the right to know how and why decisions are being made. It's also the applicants. Artists who attempt to access funding and exhibiting structures have a right to know exactly who is making selective decisions and on what basis.

So we are referring to the "c" word again, are we, A?

People are always playing into each other's hands. That is only one of the many consequences of competition within public space and public discourse.

So we are seeing a lot of conservative, safe

Exactly, B.

Yes? This is not exactly an original observation.

Come on, B. You know as well as I do that a large percentage of so-called anarchists and shit-disturbers—including some of those borderline anarchists who are really ambitious libertarians—clandestinely operate within the granting systems. Okay, we both know about a few professional motor-mouths who brag about being in a position in which they can bypass peer assessment. They have sugar daddies. Or they have agents or dealers.

That's tired, B. And it's also debatable.

Oh. So we've come back to the propaganda conundrum. Can we please move forward?

programming?

We're also seeing a lot of safe decisions being made by juries working for government-funded agencies. And there are a lot of artists dealing with sexuality in their work, or with pretty well any sort of radical politic, who have always seen state-funded art as being structurally prone to a sort of benevolent censorship.

Then why is this distrust of government bureaucracy so ingrained? Why are a lot of artists who are making committed work preferring to bypass the so-called arm's-length, juried granting systems?

Granting systems are seen as impenetrable and inaccessible by many artists—particularly younger artists. The arm's-length "excellence is the sole criteria" maxim is, for starters, highly class-insensitive.

The "talent is all that matters" aesthetic only serves to formalize artists' works—to separate content from form—to designate art some sort of elevated activity above and beyond any social-political content.

Look, A. You know as well as I do that there are too many polite little homophobes who will tolerate queers as long as they have "talent."

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Of course we both know the sort of discreet homophobes you are describing, B. As well as similar misogynists, racists, class-insensitives, etcetera. The minute—God help us—“identity” raises its head is when such jurors begin labelling artists “propagandists” as opposed to “artists.” But this does not mean that artistic merit should not be a major—if not the major—criteria for reward.

To deny funding on the basis of lack of artistic merit is not censorship, B.

I'm angry, B, but I'm also confused. It appears we're stuck in this weird purgatorial position between a public that feels we only support identity-art, as opposed to “good” art, and a public that feels arts councils are inaccessible censor boards that only support an old-boys and sympathetic old-girls network.

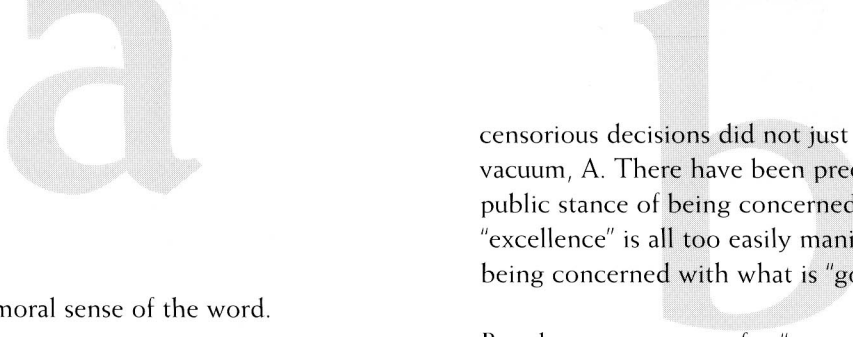
We will be expected to become an Unofficial Censor Board. Yes, that's exactly what I fear is happening. The government will abolish the Official Censor Board, as it is after all such a huge economic burden, and then they will trust us to take up the slack.

Come on, A. “Merit” and “propaganda” are hardly fixed entities. Rather, they are shifting and shiftable concepts that can be manipulated for and against particular applicants.

It can be, A, when “merit” is a transparent smoke screen for class-related access issues. Just as “broadcast quality” is often a convenient euphemism for unacceptable content. We also have a form of censorship when “merit” refers to a transparent value system used to marginalize any art that identifies its political base or position.

Yes, A, but that purgatory has been collapsing for some time now. Our own jobs as officers are in the process of becoming either radically transfigured or else downright obsolete.

Uh huh. But the government's perception that we at the arts councils are capable of making



"Good" in the moral sense of the word.

Yes. Well, now the moralists within the government and among the other self-appointed watchdogs of "the public" or "the community" can hide behind an economic agenda.

Yes. But now that artists and arts organizations, including the councils, are more than ever expected to do their own fundraising, we need to define words such as "philanthropist" and "investor."

But do philanthropists take hands-on roles in the dissemination of their generous donations? And to what degree are they expected—or should they expect—to be involved in the decision-making structures of the organizations to which they so generously donate?

I agree, B. I would say that artists and activists who are seeking out and accepting private donations had better be on their guard. They'd better have written contracts as to what is a hands-off charitable tax deduction and who is a profit-expecting investor likely to insist upon contextual input.

ensorious decisions did not just emerge from a vacuum, A. There have been precedents. Our public stance of being concerned solely with "excellence" is all too easily manipulated into being concerned with what is "good."

But also as a synonym for "accountable."

Or vice versa. It just might be the case, A, that this is the time for artists and activists to get serious about raising their own money. To stop talking about raising funds from the private sector and just do it.

A philanthropist makes donations and investors advance money in expectation of a profitable return.

It seems that distinctions between hands-on and hands-off have become more than a wee bit blurry lately, my friend.

There are also different degrees to which

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What has always annoyed me is a perceived equation of private donors with representatives of "the public."

All right, B. I don't disagree that the council's position or persona—the whole concept of arm's-length, non-profit arts funding—can all too easily be manipulated into twisted binaries. Between people and bureaucrats, between libertarianism and "political correctness," between inspired individualism and dull conformism. Etcetera etcetera. The potential for such an easy manipulation should not be used to discredit our positions and the institutions for which we are employees.

investors feel they have the right to determine the form and content of the work. It's not always a clear-cut binary between hands-on and hands-off, and there are grey areas in either direction. But I agree with you here. We don't want to be simplistically replacing state bureaucracies with corporate bureaucracies.

Because the government, which is supposedly representative of "the public," isn't. It's a borderline impenetrable bureaucracy that habitually alienates those who do not have access to its languages, systems, and codes. When I used to be an artist I was interviewed by a reporter from a particular "community" bi-weekly paper, and he asked me how I enjoyed being an arts bureaucrat. When I informed him that I was an artist, not a bureaucrat, he accused me of being a member of the bureaucracy because I displayed familiarity with the lingo. The perception that private money benefits "the public" and government money protects those who enjoy immunity from the public—who are privileged enough to be shielded from the concerns of the market—that perception is manipulated by advocates of privatization because the perception is not at all inaccurate.

Well, A. It's almost as if some long-brewing

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Yes, my dear, they have. The modernistic, anything-goes-as-long-as-it's-art agenda does tend to see legitimate representational concerns around class, race, sexual orientation, etcetera, as being inconvenient bureaucratic concerns that are irrelevant to "art."

As for the libertarian critics of government-funded art—those who feel that by definition government-granting agencies are censorious bodies—well, now they will feel vindicated because the government will expect us to do the work of the Official Censor Board. And what we'll be expected to censor will not only be sexually explicit work, but all work that announces explicit political agendas.

Sure it is. We'll be expected to deny funding to anything "special interest," since of course it is highly unlikely to transcend its limited market and successfully engage "the public."

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alliances have finally come around to officially combining forces. Right?

But the problem we have here, A, is that such a perception is not completely inaccurate. I think we can both see through those who present themselves as being "mad artists" and those who willfully confuse representational concerns with "censorship." They're being fairly typical self-promoting careerists. But all too frequently, particular representational concerns are cynically played off against each other in order to muzzle worthwhile exhibitions or projects that should be completed and then exhibited precisely because of their imperfections—as well as their imaginations.

Oh, we both know that "limited market" is synonymous with "special interests."

Well, when that becomes our official instructions from the top, then, my dear, I am out of here. My position on censorship is that if censorship were to be completely eliminated, then legitimate representational and access concerns,

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which have been cynically hijacked by pro-censorship forces, could be retabled and seriously debated. But debates around, say, sexual fantasy and racial stereotyping, or the fact that economically privileged people can afford a greater degree of freedom of speech than those who are economically struggling...just what exactly are the parallels and distinctions between freedom of speech and freedom of market? We will have to wait until censorship is abolished in order to truly examine the power structures and hierarchies of free speech.

Nicely spoken, B. That's fairly close to my own position on censorship—that while intending to protect “the public,” all it manages to accomplish is the prevention of public discourses. I have structural concerns about exactly who would abolish censorship—who would actually be in a position to make such a decision and what would be their agenda? But now—in Ontario as in Alberta as in other provinces and states and nations—censorship will become even more insidious. While its official department might well indeed be abolished for superficially economic reasons, censorship will become a key ideological component of all departmental mandates.

Hold on until tonight, dear. We still have work to do in our offices.

Sperm Attack at Remington's tonight, B?

This conversation is making me angry, A. It makes me feel like drinking.

Mere formalities, my friend. We are marking time.

You've got a date, A.